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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

MAY 1st, 1858.

TRUTH ABOUT MUSIC & MUSICIANS.

ON MODERN GERMAN OPERA MUSIC IN GENERAL.

Translated from the German by SABILLA NOVELLO.

I MUST now answer you on a subject mentioned in your first letter;—the melancholy fact, that in Germany, at the present epoch, so many operas are written which appear, only to disappear.

Were a statistic register to be laid before us of the prodigious mortality amongst new-born operas in Germany, we should be seized with piteous horror. Has the musical climate of Germany deteriorated, or do composers but bring forth weaklings into existence? I must declare myself, without reserve, to be of the latter opinion, and will at once indicate to you four causes why no opera can succeed, until these be obviated.

The first of these causes is, that many of our present composers, especially the most gifted of them, pay no attention to Schiller's maxim: "He who has satisfied his *own* times, has lived for *all* times." They forget or ignore that they should, above everything, write for their cotemporaries:—they anticipate futurity and hope for fame by creating for posterity, and by establishing a "music of the future" (for the PRESENT!!!). Many of these gentlemen, notwithstanding the intelligence they possess, cannot perceive that they attempt that in which it is impossible they should succeed; for, allowing that a period should arrive, in which operas like theirs might really please, it is evident that they cannot please at present, as we do not exist in futurity, and are not ripe for enjoyments ultimately possible.

We desire not and cannot prevent our composers beatifying posterity with their music, but it were surely expedient that those who compose for "the future" should let their "operas for the future" rest quietly in their desks until rescued thence by posterity; thus they would save themselves the trouble of fretting at the ignorant public "of the present," and save this same public from much weariness. And then, what are the composers to do, who will exist in the future? Shall they, too, write, not for their own times, but for a further future? Or do those gentlemen who rave about the "opera of the future," believe that nothing better than these, their works, can possibly arise! Notwithstanding the large portion of vanity possessed by some, I cannot imagine them capable of such insanity.

A remarkable fact is, that precisely those individuals who dream about the opera as it should be and must be in the future, are always zealous politicians, and constantly use such phrases as: "We should live, heart and hand, for the present

time," and "We should well understand the prevalent spirit of the age," &c. They therefore sin doubly,—firstly in acting contrary to their own words, and secondly in not satisfying the musical requirements of their own times. Succeeding ages will take care of themselves, and he who has created a beauteous work will please posterity as well as cotemporaries.

A second cause is the want of good opera texts. Earlier opera-composers required less care in the choice of a libretto, because, if the music pleased, a public was very indulgent as to the faults of its text; in later days, an audience is much more exacting on this point, especially since some French poets have produced excellent opera texts. So much is this the case, that success is more likely to attend an opera with good text but indifferent music, than an opera with bad text and good music. Besides the desire for good opera texts, public taste now also expects more from singers, since some of these, such as Wild and Schrödter-Devrient, who were distinguished dramatic artistes, gave proofs that good singing and great acting might well be combined. Formerly, the poor, dear German public suffered any wooden, awkward fellow to succeed on the stage, had he but a fine voice; now, however, a composer must consider the acting powers of each singer. Lortzing once refused a capital libretto (*Donna Diana*), because he believed that no singers could be found who could *act* it! (See the biography of Düringer.)

These increased pretensions on the part of the public have greatly increased the difficulties of an already onerous task,—that of writing a good opera text,—and this especially to our Germans, who, as a rule, possess more talent for lyric than for dramatic poetry, while the contrary is the case with French authors.

In addition to this want of dramatic talent, most German authors are utterly ignorant of the rules by which a drama should be governed. Therefore, they *fantastically* write down their pieces; they do not calculate effect with due consideration, without which, no well-organised, developed, and impressive work can be produced.

Even a gigantic genius like Shakespeare might not create a drama without careful calculation, study, and rumination. It would be far more easy to create a piece by intellectual calculation without innate lyrical talent than vice-versa. Examine our dramatic literature, and you will readily find confirmations of this assertion, without my pointing them out by name. The history of literature shows us that all truly great dramatists tested their plots a thousandfold, as great generals have pondered their plans of battle, or great chess-players their stratagems. And lastly, we know that all French dramatic writers zealously study the technicalities of their art, which our authors, with utter misprision of duty, treat with contempt, or even consider a defect.

A third cause is, that our modern German composers give too little consideration, in their

operas, to singers, and to the art of song; and, on the contrary, employ a singer only as an instrument,—nay, not even as a solo-instrument, but as a ripieno member of the orchestra. The natural result of this perversity is, that, in the first place, all singers view such operas with displeasure and repugnance, for which they cannot be blamed; why should they undertake the difficult task of learning a long part, when they can foresee that they will receive no acknowledgement from the public in reward of their trouble? Whence should they derive ardour, when an audience sits before them, cold, indifferent, or even disgusted?

The public does not enter a theatre merely for the sake of a composer and his caprices. It requires not only to hear music, or to be entertained by dramatic action; it seeks also the eximious charm which lies in expressive *song*. Why does the Italian opera hold its place in every country? What was, and is, the irresistible attraction it exerts over the public? *Song*, in the first place, and then the comprehensible melodies which the Italians, wisely enough, never disdain.

Our modern German composers, on the contrary, despise singers; they despise the public longing for beautiful, *pre-eminent* melody, and thus they are justly recompensed when, in their turn, they are despised by the public, and their operas gain no success.

Look through the scores of our masters—Weigl, Winter, Mozart, Weber;—*they* wrote for singers, and for the public. Reckon the arias, scenas, &c., &c., out of different operas, which are oftenest executed at concerts, or sung in public and private meetings,—they are the most melodious. Count up the opera-parts which singers perform by preference,—in which they produce their greatest effect,—and which they therefore select as their *Star-performance* (*Gastrollen*) characters;—they are those in which *song* is prevailing,—in which singers may display to advantage their voice and vocal art.

Let all those desist from operatic composition who are incapable of writing such (*Gastrollen*) parts, or who cannot create a melody which shall find its way to street-organs. Yes, however strange this axiom may sound, I maintain its truth; and this brings me to a fourth cause, perhaps the most important one, why our modern operas so seldom succeed. Existing German composers *have no perception of simple, popular melody; they will not, or cannot create such*. And yet, without contradiction, *simple melody*, completely entrusted to *song*, should be and ever remain the pre-eminent element of operatic music.

Melody may be constructed, and has been constructed, in three different manners.

1stly—The declamation of words by a performer, may be imitated by heightening and lowering vocal tones,—by retarding or hurrying their progression in conjunction with certain

syllables or words,—and by observing the different duration of pauses indicated by punctuation in the text. Melody, constructed on these principles, will be conscientiously adapted to its words, but readily becomes stiff and dry, and, in reality, is only a musical and regularly measured declamation of a poem.

2ndly—Single syllables, words, or verses, may be less taken into consideration than the sense thereof, and the sentiment expressed through them; the poet is not followed minutely line for line, but the whole musical piece represents the whole poem.

3rdly—The only aim may be, to caress the ear, little or no importance being attached to words, sense, or character in a piece; the care of rendering such a vocal work expressive and pleasing being incumbent entirely on a singer.

In the first-named manner of forming melody, intellect is conspicuously active.

The third manner is often employed by modern Italians and French,—but no one can wonder that this leads to a display of the most unnatural contradiction and the most outrageous incompatibility; sorrowful, conflicting, or wild passions being pourtrayed in dance-rhythms: yet these lovely melodies enchant the ear with sweet magic tones, and meet with approval from those who desire melody *only*,—those who either cannot rightly judge whether music express what, in such circumstances, it should express, or who blind themselves on this point, and merely desire to luxuriate in the rich flow of a tonal stream.

Only the second manner of constructing melody, in which intellect *and* feeling are active in combination, will always remain the best and most worthy of Art. Mozart, in this, serves as an unsurpassed model; his melodies fulfil all the conditions which may and ought to be exacted, and they please both uninitiated and initiated, for they are at once true, beautiful, and intelligible,—they are to poetry what color is to drawing.

In most of our modern German operas, we too often merely hear a medley of tones, instead of a connected melody, for even when our present composers produce a melody, they seldom give it entirely to the voice-part, but dismember it, and take portions of it out of the singer's mouth, as it were, and entrust these scraps to instruments; besides this, they overcharge a melody with harmony and modulation,—accompany almost every note by a different chord,—modulate into a fresh key in each bar,—and thus, especially if depicting simple sentiments, sin against true expression, destroy artistic unity, and confuse the perceptions of their listeners.

When they really entrust a voice-part with an entire melody, they overwhelm and suffocate it by full accompaniment of instrumental masses, which they construct above or beneath it. We should, with justice, laugh at any painter who should paint sunlight or bright moonlight, and then cover the whole landscape with thick, dark

colors; but similar folly is too constantly committed by our modern opera composers;—they daub their melodies with thick tone-color until they disappear. It is nothing uncommon for an aria, for instance, which excites little or no effect when performed in its opera, to please when accompanied on the pianoforte. This is easily explained:—the melody is then relieved of its superfluous instrumentation, and gains its appropriate importance.

Furthermore, the moderns construct too small melodies,—unconnected melodious sentences,—undeveloped melody-seeds. A continuous melody of eight bars duration appears to them a too “habitual” creation,—a too clear and simple—abomination. And as to writing a second section, to give symmetry to the whole!—if ever they be visited by melodious inspiration, they quickly shake it from them, in order to plunge again into their scientific hurly-burly. Verily, they are infanticides; for no sooner have they been delivered of a melody, than they strangle or smother it. They resemble, not the nightingale, but the stormy petrel, who feels most at ease amidst howling winds and roaring waves.

On this account, they entrust all expression of violent passion to their darling orchestra, which, under their spiritual direction, storms and rages, puffs and blows, roars and surges, until the voice of a singer is completely overpowered and drowned;—we hear him no longer,—we merely see how he desperately strides about the stage, and, like a speaker on the hustings, strainingly endeavours to gain a hearing above the wild noise of assembled multitudes. Singers are now no longer enabled to produce those powerful, exciting, and pathetic effects, which the varied human voice is capable of affording in passionate situations. A whole host of horns, trumpets, trombones, drums, kettle-drums, piccolo-flutes, &c., &c., are arrayed in the battle-field against him.

Many of my readers have doubtless heard the great Schrödter-Devrient in *Fidelio*, and remember the prison-scene, in which, while the orchestra remains dead-silent, she thunders forth: “First kill his wife!” Everyone who has heard this will feel a thrill at even the recollection of the extraordinary emotion these few words called forth in his soul. Notwithstanding, however, that such convincing facts stand before them, our moderns believe that they forward the “progress” of operatic composition by trying to depict strong passions in their perverse fashion.

In operatic music, *passion can only be faithfully and appropriately expressed by the human voice*. I will admit that, in order to support or to add to effect, an orchestra may burst forth during the pauses in song, but must subdue its thunders whenever the human voice *sings*. Unfortunately, no opera composer has thoroughly attended to this law,—not even Mozart, at all times.

I could quote many wondrously beautiful examples, besides the one already mentioned, in which highest passion is expressed by the voice, while orchestral power is subdued; for instance, the song of Simon and his brothers, in the first act of Méhul’s *Joseph in Egypt*,—in which Simon utters his remorse and despair while his brothers endeavour to tranquilise and console him.

In addition to all that I have already adduced, modern opera-composers do not understand how to *characterise* persons and situations. We generally hear, in new operas, not the personæ of the piece, but the vanity and errors of the composer. For *each* piece they employ the same instrumentation (almost always the full orchestra), the same rhythms, the same harmonies, &c., &c. A painter who introduces all colors into every picture, and into each part of his picture, is at best a dauber, but no artist. If our moderns would only examine the opera-scores of our great Mozart! In them, each part is different from all others, and individually characteristic,—a self-contained, living impersonation. Let them, above all, study the *Zauberflöte*, in order to learn the means by which a true musician can elevate each personage into—a character!

THE CRYSTAL PALACE.

THE programme advertised for the summer months affords evidence of increased activity in the management of the undertaking, and a desire to increase the accommodation for visitors. The musical arrangements are calculated to give very general satisfaction. It appears that there is to be an additional band of wind instruments, to be stationed principally in the grounds, in order to attract the company to the most beautiful localities. There will also be a regular and more popular use of the great organ, so that frequent opportunities may occur of hearing that noble instrument.

The musical programme will consist, in the early part of each day, of a performance on the organ; the first part of a concert by the orchestral band; then a joint performance by the two bands, stringed and wind; and the music by the wind band in the grounds until the close of the Palace.

Popular sports and pastimes are to receive additional attention; cricket, archery, and bowling, are to be encouraged, and a gymnasium and maze established; and increased facilities will be afforded for the visits of societies, and the working staffs of large firms, for holding their annual gatherings at the Palace. There are to be three flower shows and two poultry shows in the season. The directors have also under consideration the establishment of an art-union, on the same principle as those of London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow; not confined, however, to painting, but the other ornamental and useful arts. It is also in contemplation to commence a series of lectures on the varied natural, scientific, and artistic contents of the Crystal Palace.

Among the special objects of interest in the coming season, there will be a grand choral performance by the metropolitan chorus of the Handel Festival; performances by the chorals of Bradford and Yorkshire,—by the children of the Tonic Sol-Fa Association,—by Mr. Henry Leslie’s choir; concerts by the band of the Paris Garde Nationale; and a great choral demonstration by 5,000 children of the national schools in and around London. The usual Saturday concerts, under the direction of Mr. Manns, will also be greatly improved.